The importance of failure

18F

Sometimes things just don't go the way you expect. Now what?

What is failure?

18F

We overuse the word failure.

We overuse the word failure. **Total failure is when success is no longer possible.**

We overuse the word failure. Total failure is when success is no longer possible. Anything less is a setback that can be overcome.

Failure is one of the most important parts of developing great products.

Failure is one of the most important parts of developing great products.

Failing tells you what doesn't work, and helps you find what does.

Failure is one of the most important parts of developing great products. Failing tells you what doesn't work, and helps you find what does. Failing helps you find patterns.

Failure teaches you far more than success does.

# The importance of experimentation

18F

There's no objective measure of product quality.

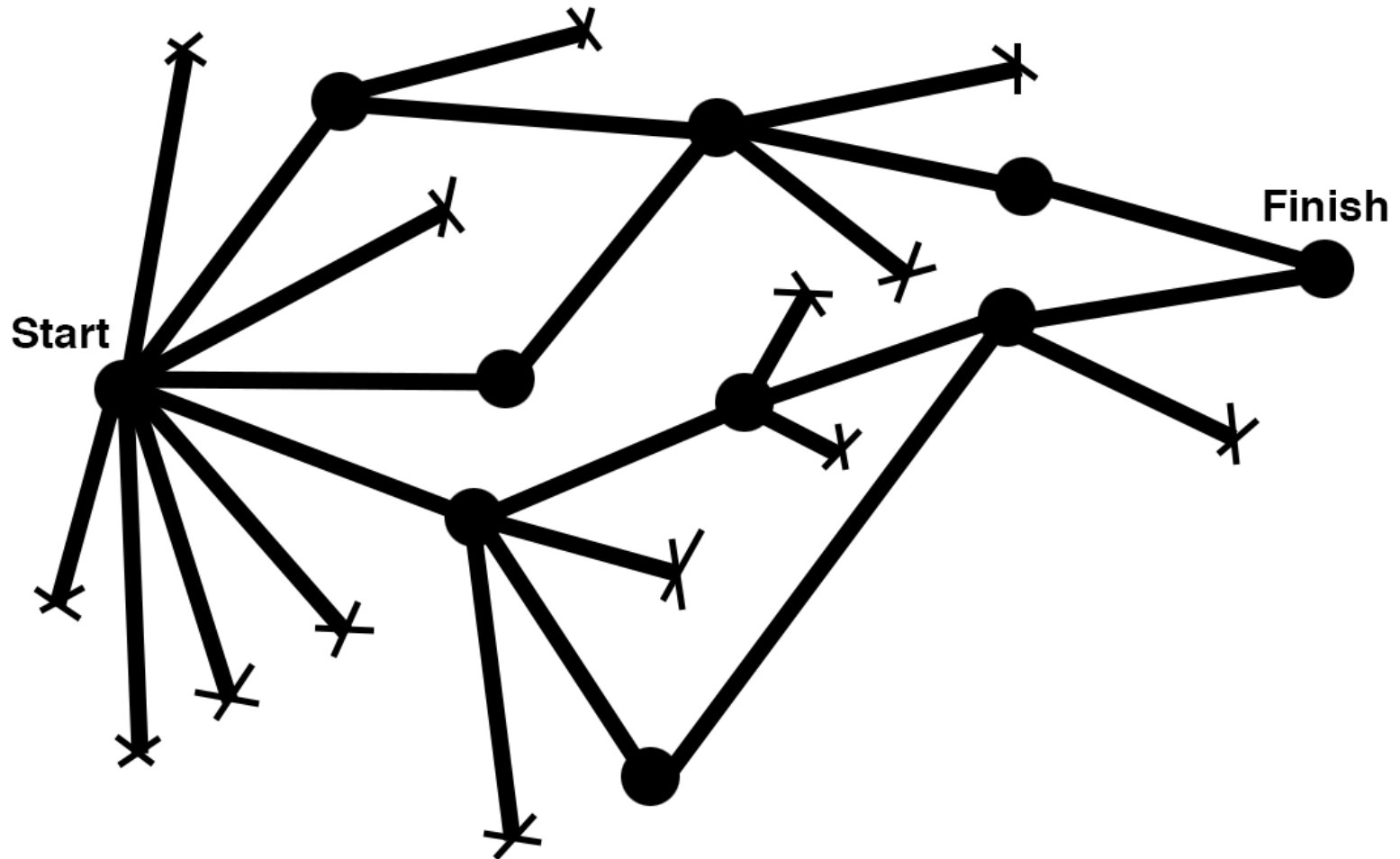There's no objective measure of product quality. **You have to have something to compare against.**

If you've only explored a single solution to a problem, how do you know it's the best one?

Picking a single solution leads you on a wild goose chase, as you adapt that solution to continuous external pressure.
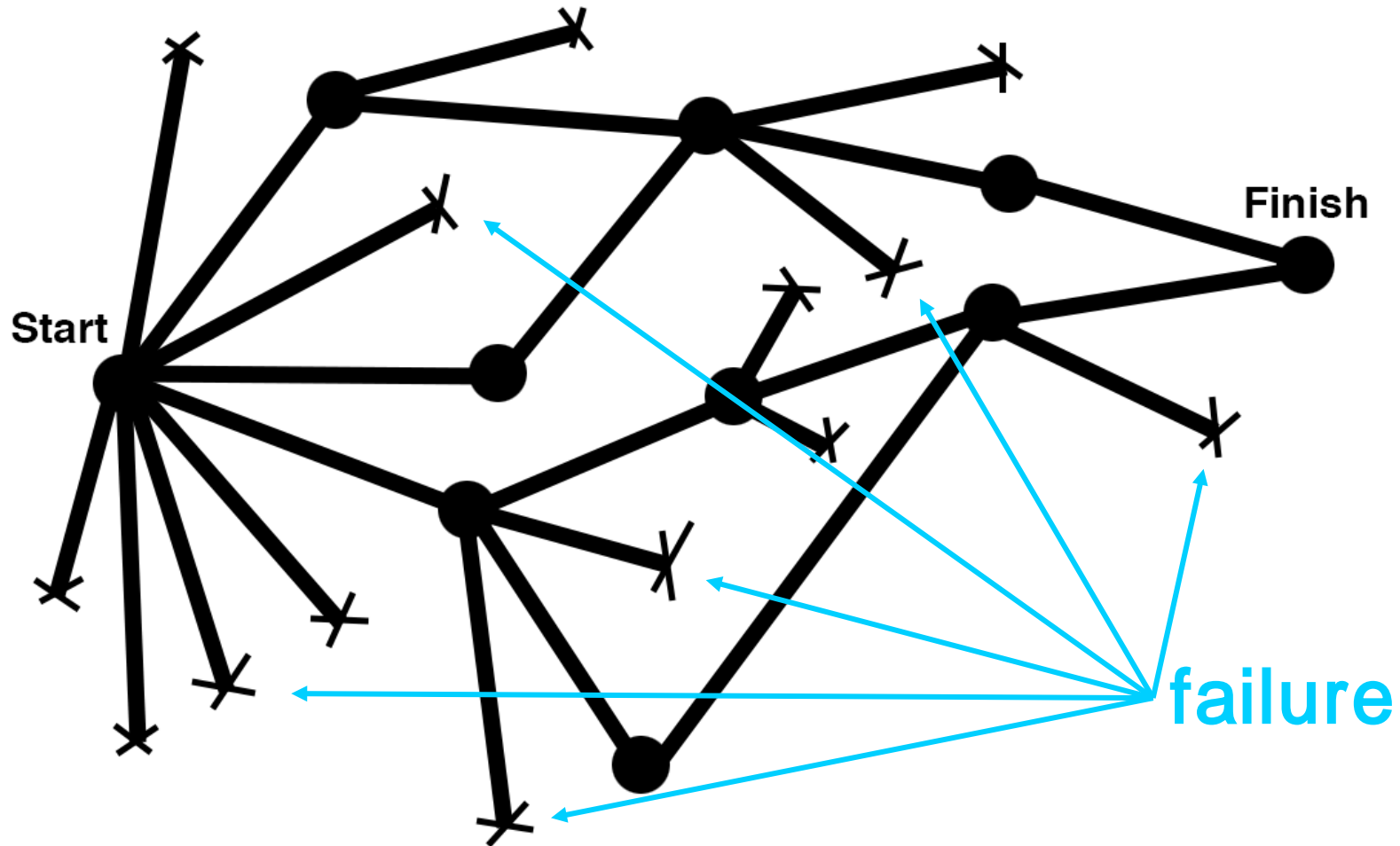
Start

Finish

*from Julie Zhuo's *Junior Designers vs. Senior Designers*
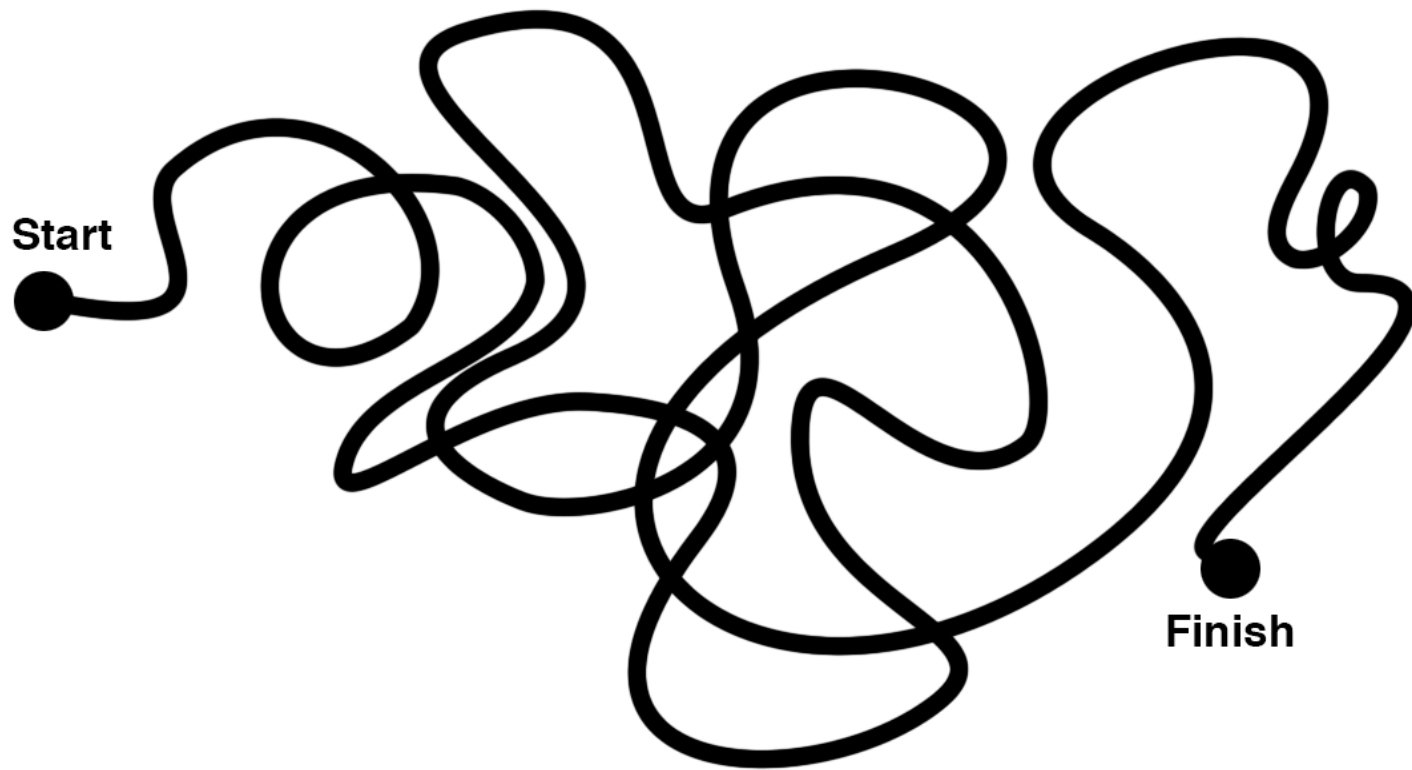
It's far easier to systematically explore many different solutions and learn from each of them.

Start

Finish

*from Julie Zhuo's *Junior Designers vs. Senior Designers*

What's this got to do with failure?

Start

Finish

failure

*from Julie Zhuo's *Junior Designers vs. Senior Designers*

**Failure isn't really failure at all…**
it's knowledge.

Failing gracefully

18F

That's all well and good when you're experimenting, but it's not much consolation when you've spent weeks (or months, or years) on something that didn't pan out.
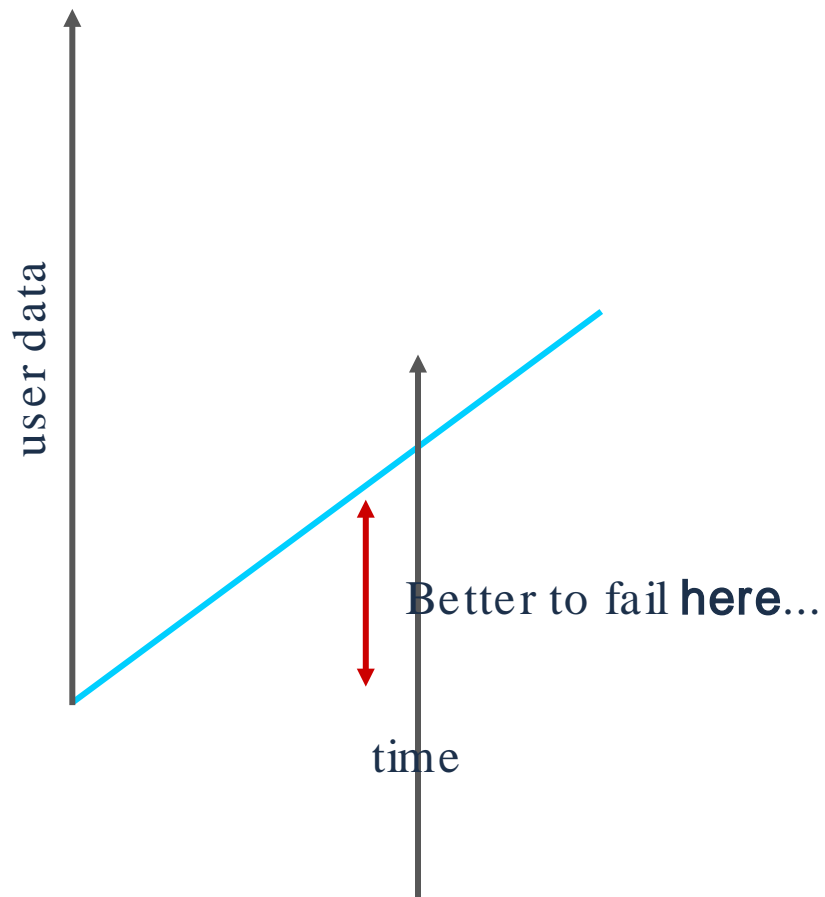
But it's always better to fail now before the problem gets bigger.

Imagine a database...

user data

time

Imagine a database...

user data

Better to fail **here**...

time

Imagine a database...

user data
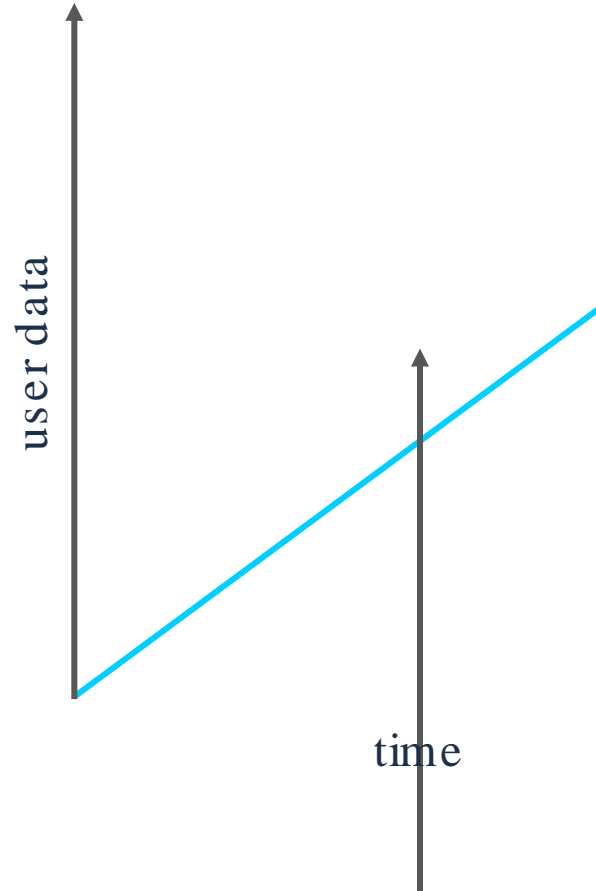
time

...than **here**
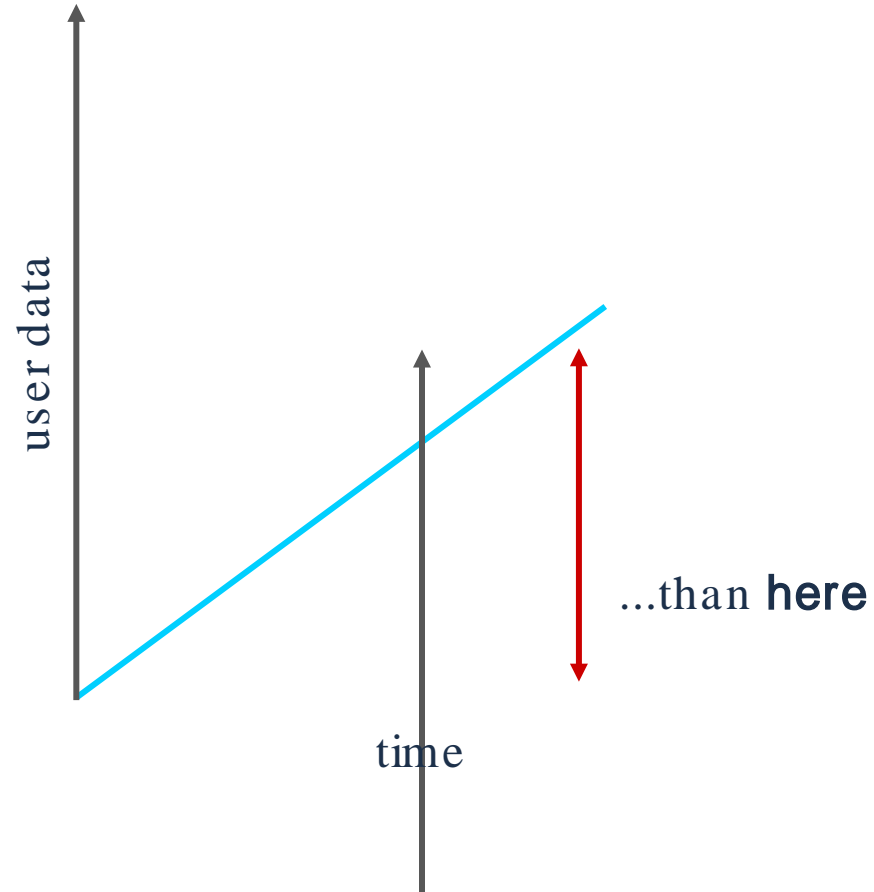
Ultimately, failing tells you that whatever you tried isn't going to get you what you want.

That just means it's time to try something different.

Updating the vision

Why are you changing your vision?

18F

Because your understanding of the problem has changed.

You've realized that your original vision wasn't what you want.

You've realized that your original vision wasn't what you want. Or that the plan to get there was flawed.

You've realized that your original vision wasn't what you want. Or that the plan to get there was flawed. Or maybe something outside of your control has changed.

The first thing you have to do is figure out how to move forward.

Finding your way

Finding your way

1	2	3	4	5
Establish ground truth	Figure out the implications	Assess your current plan	Come up with next steps	Articulate the benefits of the path forward

What actually happened? Why did it happen?

What effect will this have on the project?

Given this information, is the current plan a good one?

What should we do?

Why is that a good path forward?

Selling the plan

Once you have a new plan, you have to win everyone over.

Especially leadership.

What motivated the original vision?
What factors influenced it?

What got left out?

A few tricks
* appeal to *their* priorities
* communicate proactively
* focus on outcomes (good *and* bad)
* justify with data

Ultimately, you want to show that changing direction is a positive thing because it will help everyone get what they want.

Practice

Let's try an example:

Your vision has been to build a best-in class iOS app to help people in <completely made up county> register to vote.

Your research team just conducted a broad survey of the county.

They learned that only 18% of unregistered voters use iOS. 43% use Android, and 31% don't have a smartphone at all.

example

Adjusting our vision

1

Establish
ground truth

Adjusting our vision

1

**Establish
ground truth**

82% of the people surveyed don't use iOS

* how generalizable is our survey?

example

Adjusting our vision

2

Figure out the implications

example

Adjusting our vision

2

Figure out the implications

If we build an iOS-only solution, most unregistered voters won't use it.

example

Adjusting our vision

3

Assess your current plan

Adjusting our vision

3

Assess your current plan

Our current plan excludes around 82% of our target audience. That's really bad.

example

Adjusting our vision

4

Come up with
next steps

Adjusting our vision

4

Come up with
next steps

We should build something that serves more people. Like a website.

example

Adjusting our vision

5

Articulate the benefits of the path forward

example

Adjusting our vision

5

Articulate the benefits of the path forward

A responsive website will serve everyone with a smartphone (61%) and anyone with access to a computer (x%).

How do we pitch the new plan?

Let's do another example:

Your initial vision is to simplify the process for getting camping permits in national parks.

After a few months of interviews and testing, you learn that campers don't have any complaints about filling out the forms or waiting for permits.

However, almost all of them complained about the way that staff communicated with them.

example

Adjusting our vision

1

Establish
ground truth

example

Adjusting our vision

1

Establish ground truth

Staff/camper interaction is the biggest pain point.

example

Adjusting our vision

2

Figure out the
implications

example

Adjusting our vision

2

Figure out the implications

Making automated process improvements won't change what campers are unhappy about.

example

Adjusting our vision

3

Assess your current plan

example

Adjusting our vision

3

Assess your current plan

If we keep focusing on the application process we aren't addressing the real problem. That minimizes our impact.

example

Adjusting our vision

4

Come up with
next steps

example

Adjusting our vision

4

Come up with next steps

Let's focus less on the permit application process and more on creating better interactions between staff/campers.

example

Adjusting our vision

5

Articulate the
benefits of the
path forward

Adjusting our vision

5

Articulate the benefits of the path forward

By creating a better relationship between staff and campers, we can grant more permits and make everyone happy campers.

How do we pitch the new plan?